

Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities

Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning

Evidence: Lifelong Learning and Technological Change

Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities promotes opportunities to empower young people and adults with any kind of disability to realise their potential in further, continuing and higher education, training and employment throughout the United Kingdom. Skill works by providing information and advice to individuals, promoting good practice and influencing policy in partnership with disabled people, service providers and policy makers.

Skill welcomes the establishment and remit of the Inquiry into The Future for Lifelong Learning. Skill's area of expertise lies in the lifelong learning opportunities for disabled people, and so our responses to calls for evidence throughout the Inquiry will focus on this area. Regarding this particular call for evidence on lifelong learning and technological change, Skill will emphasise that importance of access to technology and accessibility of technology for lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning is increasingly delivered online or using Information Technology. The greater availability and use of technology generally has led to an increase in lifelong learning, both formally and informally. This change has advantages and benefits for disabled people, but Skill also has some concerns with reliance on technology for provision.

The advantage of learning online or with IT is the flexibility that it offers; allowing learning to take place at a pace and time that suits the learner. Online learning and learning with IT can often support the more visual or verbal learner depending on the way information is presented. This flexibility and learning style is important for disabled adults with a range of different impairments. However some disabled adults will prefer to learn face-to-face or with more practical tasks and there must equally be provision and support for this learning. Social interaction that takes place through technology can be easier for some people, but removing the opportunity for face-to-face social interaction may be a negative factor for others.

Skill believes that technology should compliment, not replace other provision. It is important to balance the opportunities that technology undoubtedly offers, with the benefits of other means of communicating.

Increasingly technology is being seen as the main way to disseminate information. Dissemination of information is a key aspect of lifelong learning as this may be how someone first becomes engaged in the idea of learning

again, or information may be the means of learning for someone. This way of working is used because of the ease of using technology to create information, the cost for mass dissemination and the ease of finding information. Again, this is not the case for every learner. Some people might want to access information in different ways, including on paper, face-to-face, using Braille or audiotape.

Skill recommends that whilst the Inquiry should reflect the important role technology plays in lifelong learning, it should also reflect the importance that this does not eclipse other ways of learning.

Having access to technology, whether in your own home or a public place is increasingly being seen as “the norm”. For some disabled people the cost of having their own IT equipment can be a barrier to lifelong learning provision and opportunities. However, the availability of IT facilities in Libraries and public places has increased.

For some disabled people though, having access to IT is not as simple as IT facilities being available; they have to be accessible. Disabled people face barriers to lifelong learning through technology because of the accessibility of technology and the cost of Assistive Technology that might make standard technology access. The cost of purchasing technology affects individuals and organisations providing public IT facilities, such as libraries. Moreover many disabled people may not be aware of the possibilities offered by Assistive Technology, how to use it and what options might be the most appropriate to meet their individual needs. Training in how to use Assistive Technology is vital for a disabled person to fully utilise the possibilities that it offers. Providing training and making information on Assistive Technology available to carers is important, as they are often the first-line of support and guidance that a disabled person might have should problems arise. This does not remove or reduce the important availability of professional and accessible support when there are software or hardware problems. IT/AT Support Services need to be straightforward, easy and inexpensive to use, and must understand not only the technology involved, but also disability and communication issues involved.

Skill recommends that the Inquiry does not assume peoples awareness of technology options that could suit their needs, lifestyle and learning style.

Skill recommends that the Inquiry highlight the importance of accessible technology, whether through availability in public places or affordability or private purchases.

**Skill Policy Team
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